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AUTHOR McFarland, Katherine P.
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ABSTRACT

Discussing a teacher's effort to improve the research techniques of her secondary students, this paper outlines the implementation of controlled research projects. It suggests using many small projects to develop researching techniques, rather than one large "end-of-the-semester" project. The paper gives 8 different topic options for these "micro themes." It concludes that controlled papers mean more practice, more research, more interest, and more success. (SC)

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ENJOYING STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS:

INSTEAD OF ONE, TRY EIGHT!

Katherine P. McFarland, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
Shippensburg University
Department of English
Shippensburg, PA 17257-2299

(717) 477-1496 (office)
kpmcfa@ark.ship.edu

Katherine McFarland specializes in language and literacy at Shippensburg University where she teaches Secondary English Methods, College Writing, Modern American Literature, Young Adult Literature, and supervises student teachers in the Language Arts classroom.

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ENJOYING STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS:

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I can't remember what year it was, but I noticed late one evening, during a mid-life crisis in academia, that in order to grade my stack of research papers -- all sixty of them-- I couldn't settle down without cleaning the house first and then pouring a rather large glass of cold Chablis. This worried me. I had never before associated alcohol with the task of grading papers. Honest. So the Chablis I rationalize, but the cleaning-of-my-house made me wonder why I didn't want to touch those papers.

If this was the way I was feeling about that stack of research papers on my living room rug, I wondered how my students regarded this Herculean task of combing materials, taking notes, organizing, drafting, revising, and spinning such a process into a finished product. Actually, if my students walked through such a process every time, I would have been elated. Yet, I realized that my students too often related to research papers as consumers who spit back what has been digested by others. Often this spitting back of information encouraged plagiarism and discouraged critical thinking. Sound familiar?

So I started my own investigations. I went straight to the library only to find a handful of journal articles that addressed strategies that were worth trying in order to motivate my students to do their own research. Armed with a few strategies and a desire to experiment, I began to implement controlled research projects -- a theme that came up often in the sparse literature.

By controlled, I mean that the papers are controlled by time, length, purpose, and in some cases, materials. Each research project emphasizes all the sequential processes of good research but is compacted into smaller papers

that become progressively more difficult once the basics have been covered. So I have found that multiple "micro themes" work better with my students instead of the larger end-of-the-semester projects. I embraced this idea the more I experimented and knew that my students could benefit more from multiple small papers than one hit or miss proposition. I knew shorter papers would mean more practice.

Although I use many controlled research projects in Freshman Composition, any Secondary English class can develop appropriate micro-themes that may give you less gray hairs. Here are a few samples to start the wheels turning.

1. **Day of Birth** - When developmental students need to gain confidence by using sources like the NEW YORK TIMES, ask them to research the date and year they were born. I then ask students to report on a 5" by 8" index card the local, national, and international news of the day. This beginning research activity becomes a stepping stone for more complex assignments.
2. **Case Folder Approach** – Several of my colleagues have found much success by giving students different folders filled with articles on controversial topics, i.e., gun control. One such example, "The Bernie Goetz Case," gave students the experience of reading related articles and writing a persuasive piece in which they must defend or dispute Goetz for his vigilante actions.
3. **The Movie Review** - Students must watch and critique a movie of their choice. They then find three critics who have published reviews on the selected movie in popular newspapers or magazines. On a large 5" by 7 index card, students are asked to compose their review of the movie -- intertwined with the three

published critics. Economy of words is emphasized as well as direct quotes, paraphrases, and endnotes. Along with the final index card, xerox copies of the articles from critics must be passed in, as well.

4. **Persuasive Letter Writing** – Students investigate a local or national concern that interests them by ravaging through local newspapers and magazines. After collecting information on a topic, students must take a stand by writing a persuasive letter to a public official to ask for some action to be taken. Students share in the excitement when their voices are heard and letters answered.
5. **Researching Old Murders** - Kraus has been assigning old murders from the NEW YORK TIMES to students in place of assigning the traditional term paper. Students must gather, organize, and reference materials to solve these unsolved mysteries. Kraus reports that motivation is high and plagiarism is low.
6. **Oral Histories** - Part of research can be investigating the stories that are found through interviews. One of my favorite assignments involves asking students to interview the eldest member of their family to discuss family heritage, customs, or historic events. Students then write up their findings in a formal paper. Of the numerous papers I have received in the past, this activity always has engaged total commitment from my students. Of course, an alternative assignment must be made for those students who are adopted.
7. **Action Research Papers** - An exciting addition to research is for students to investigate a problem, gather data, draw conclusions,

and present findings in a formal paper. Besides using library sources, students can learn much from this triangulation of primary and secondary sources. For example, students may investigate how members in their community feel about a perceived problem, or students could create a feasibility study to address the need for a place for teens to go after school. It would be important for students to choose their interests.

8. **I-Search** - Macrorie has had much success in getting students to choose any topic or questions they want to investigate. Students have investigated topics as varied as how to start a restaurant to computer glitches in the year 2000. Time, length, shape, and purpose on these projects may take any form; however primary and secondary sources create more comprehensive papers.

Conclusions

As instructors, I know that we need to continue to search for better strategies for involving students in research projects. I found that controlled papers mean more practice, more research, more interest, and more success. I found that controlled papers mean less plagiarism, less anxiety, and fewer headaches for me as well as my students. An added bonus was that shorter papers required students to have more practice with the conventions of research and more practice with the "the economy of words." When students are forced to edit carefully, their writing became stronger, tighter, and more energetic. Although in most of these assignments, I still require note cards, citations, and manuscript form, I have come to appreciate with my students that research does not have to be boring. I can even find that I look forward to my students research papers without first cleaning my house. That is a very good sign.

Works Cited

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